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Dianne Wampler 08/21/2006 08:55:36 PM From DB/Inbox: Dianne Wampler

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Text:

UNCLAS ISTANBUL 01501

SIPDIS

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ACTION: ECON
INFO: CONS PA RAO FCS FAS MGT PMA POL DCM AMB

DISSEMINATION: ECON /1

CHARGE: PROG

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FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5710
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHDA/AMCONSUL ADANA PRIORITY 2251

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001501

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: EAID CASC TU
SUBJECT: A BITTER DAY: THE SEVENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1999
EARTHQUAKE

REF: A. 03 ISTANBUL 1039
1B. ANKARA 3436

11. (SBU) Summary: On August 17, the seventh anniversary of the deadly 1999 Marmara earthquake, newspapers published articles evaluating ongoing efforts, especially in Istanbul, to prepare for the next big quake. The commentators unanimously criticized insufficient preparations and planning and the slow speed at which retrofitting and reconstruction of buildings has occurred. Echoing our previous observations (refs A & B), a major obstacle cited by experts in the articles was the lack of clear leadership or responsibility, as well as the lack of well-defined short-term, medium-term, and long-term plans.

"We Will Never Forget, We Can Never Forget"

12. (SBU) Most newspapers on August 17 ran articles on the 7th anniversary of the 7.4-magnitude Marmara earthquake, which killed more than 17,000 and left countless more injured. Although some had articles in commemoration of the actual event, the primary focus was the state of current earthquake mitigation and response measures taken by the government. Commentators were unanimously critical of Turkey's, and particularly Istanbul's, state of preparedness.

The Experts Weigh In On Current Preparations: No Good News

13. (SBU) Several of the newspapers interviewed experts in earthquake planning, engineering, and other related fields. More than a few of the experts lambasted Turkey's latest "9th Development Plan" for the years 2007-2013, which reportedly does not address the earthquake

issue. "It is impossible to understand the exclusion of a topic so influential to this country's future," declared Yavuz Tanrisever, the president of the Istanbul branch of the Geologic Engineering Association, to Milliyet. Ismet Cengiz, TMMOB Geologic Engineering Association Administration President, told Radikal that if a 7.5-magnitude earthquake occurs with an epicenter in Istanbul, 30,000 buildings will be totally destroyed, 40,000 buildings will be heavily damaged, 50,000 people will die, and there could be at least fifty billion dollars worth of damage.

¶4. (SBU) Radikal not only elicited commentator's criticisms of current planning, but also evaluated preparation in Istanbul's public buildings. It noted that following the 1999 earthquake a determination was made that 2,473 public buildings would need to be retrofitted against earthquakes or demolished and rebuilt entirely. These included 308 medical buildings, 1,783 schools, 68 administration buildings, 27 social services buildings, and 46 student dormitories. Over the past seven years, of the 308 hospital buildings only 11 have been retrofitted, while only 326 schools have been retrofitted, a mere five dormitories have been retrofitted, and projects for making security and administrative offices earthquake-prepared are still in the early stages. Radikal noted that if the current pace continues, it would take 190 years to outfit the hospital buildings, 31 years to finish the schools, and 55 years to complete the dormitories.

¶5. (SBU) Not only did the newspapers criticize the lack of effort over the past seven years, but also pointed out that the probability of a large earthquake has only increased in the years following the 1999 disaster. "In 1999, the probability of a large earthquake in Istanbul in the next 30 years was 60%," Dr. Haluk Sucuoglu noted to Sabah. "Since we haven't had an earthquake in seven years, now this probability has increased."

Where's the Money?

¶6. (SBU) Clearly money is a large factor in the seemingly slow response of government. One figure cited was 4.2 billion YTL (approximately USD 2.9 billion) for the study of public buildings, evaluation of security, preparations for the retrofitting of buildings, and the construction of materials for the retrofitting projects. Somewhat more disturbing was Milliyet's reporting that a significant portion of the "earthquake tax" to help rebuild and prepare for future disasters has been instead used to pay off Turkey's debt and interest payments. According to statistics cited by the paper, in 2003, 1.423 quadrillion old Turkish Lira (approximately USD 988 million) was collected and 1.043 quadrillion (approximately USD 723 million) was used to pay off debt and interest rather than for its expressed purpose.

Authorities' Response: Newspapers Not Favorable

¶7. (SBU) The newspapers focused intently on expert criticism and did not attempt to put official replies in a good light. Istanbul Governor Muammer Guler gave a press conference on August 16 and reportedly responded that "nowhere in the world can this job be finished in three to five years." Mustafa Taymaz, head of the Disaster Relief Administration, was

quoted as saying that the "infrastructure was ready" and that disaster administration was "better than in the U.S. and in some EU countries," but that it was "not right for citizens to wait for the government." "If necessary, citizens can obtain credit and strengthen their buildings themselves." Radikal commented that the government was "passing the ball to citizens," implying that officials were not taking responsibility for earthquake preparations. A headline also read "Everyone is busy with state 'projects' to strengthen buildings," detailing the numerous unrealized projects which have solved the earthquake problem "on paper."

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Overall, the newspapers focused on current earthquake preparations and their conclusions were not positive. Sucuoglu commented to Sabah that "had the 1999 earthquake been taken as a good warning for Istanbul, the necessary preparations could have been done in seven years." Whether this timeframe is accurate or not, retrofitting efforts have been disappointingly slow. The lack of ownership of this issue has been a major obstacle to effective preparations (refs A & B). One expert advised that the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality office needs to unequivocally take charge and create a plan with short-term (three to five year), medium-term (10 year), and long-term (25 to 30 year) goals. Despite the somewhat alarming picture painted by the media and local experts, efforts by the GOT at all levels are ongoing. The cooperative effort with the USGS that began in 1999 continues with a team from USGS currently in Istanbul. Media scrutiny of earthquake preparations may also serve to spur the government to greater action.

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